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**Art, Knowledge and Testimony**

**Abstract**

*In this paper we want to explore different epistemological benefits that we gain by dealing with some artworks, and our focus is on narrative arts. We claim that there is a sense in which narrative arts (e.g. literature, film and possibly even some expressions of visual art) can be similar to testimony, in that they provide information which can be epistemologically valuable for cognitive agents such as we are. We identify at least two broad categories of these epistemological benefits, the first one includes ‘facts stating’ and in that sense is parallel to the paradigmatic case of testimony in which what the testifier says can be a source of knowledge as mere acquisition of facts for his audience (this is the first case when we speak of artworks as ‘tellings’). This, however, is not the most peculiar and distinctive kind of epistemological benefits we can gain from art. The other one has to do with raising awareness, of deepening our understanding about some issues either by a specific, powerful and involving way of providing us facts (this is the second way in which we speak of artworks as ‘tellings’), or by presenting us the stance, the attitude, the opinion of the artist that can be enlightening, or challenging for us (in this case, we speak of ‘sayings’).*

**Key words**

narrative arts, literature, testimony, knowledge, epistemological benefits

**1.**

The question we want to raise in this paper is this: is it plausible to claim that by dealing with art, the audience can learn something new or form some kind of possibly true beliefs, as well as develop, clarify and deepen their own view about the world? We will claim that it is. This strictly epistemological formulation is by no means accidental, since our starting point is the epistemological debate about the possibility of learning from the words of others.<sup>1</sup> What we want to do is to show that at least some artists (mainly engaged in narrative arts) can be seen as testifiers or informants, and their works as a kind of testimony. This means that we have to show that there are enough similarities between at least some artworks and a “real life” testimony and that the same (or at least very similar) mechanisms are at work in obtaining information in both cases. For the simplicity sake, we will refer to these two as fictional and non-fictional testimony.

What we would like to show in the end is that there are different epistemological benefits that we gain when dealing with some artworks. Just like in

<sup>1</sup> This comes from Jennifer Lackey, who, in her book entitled *Learning from Words* develops a theory of gaining knowledge through what other people tell us. The importance of testi-

mony for our account will soon become obvious. See J. Lackey, *Learning from Words*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008.

the case of non-fictional testimony, what the artwork tells us can be informative and facts-stating, but in the case of artworks, the most peculiar and distinctive contribution is represented by deepening of knowledge and a better understanding of the facts that we might already know, or in the shaping of our attitudes (this can be obtained by a distinctive way of offering us facts that is more vivid and involving than the usual mere providing of facts, or by expression of attitudes of the artist which can challenge or enlighten our own worldview). But before showing that, we need to specify a bit just what kind of art we have in mind, as well as what we mean by ‘fictional testimony’.

Our focus is on narrative arts. The paradigmatic example of narrative arts in our paper is represented by literature, but we do not exclude other forms of narrative arts, like films and narrative visual arts.<sup>2</sup> In our paper we will use the expression ‘fictional testimony’ in order to refer to the testimony coming from narrative artworks. This is only a terminological stipulation for the sake of this paper, and by this stipulation we do not deny the distinction between literature and fiction, moreover, we accept this distinction as put forward by Peter Lamarque.<sup>3</sup>

## 2.

Epistemologists have long ago seen the importance of testimony in knowledge acquisition. In order to obtain knowledge of things not seen, experienced or tried, we have nothing else to rely on than the words of those who have seen it, experienced it or tried it. Given, of course, that they are sincere and competent, there is no reason to rule them out as unreliable. We have never been to Tbilisi so we can trust you when you tell us something about it. In that case, you are a reliable informant for us: your statements about Tbilisi, the facts you tell us about the city, can make us learn something about it. Most epistemologists working in the field of testimony would agree with this, although some might ask for some additional evidence in support of your claim.

Now, we must explain two things in order to remark the epistemological relevance of art. First, the most peculiar and distinctive contribution of art, when it is fact-stating, is not represented by the mere telling of facts, but by doing that in a particularly involving, or enlightening way (even in the cases when the facts presented are familiar or other ways easily accessible through some other sources). Second, there is another kind of relevant epistemological contribution of (at least some) artworks and in order to explain it, we claim that the notion of testimony should be stretched a bit, so as to include expressions of opinions, stances, ways of seeing, and similar. This idea is nicely captured by Alan Millar. He distinguishes between tellings and sayings. As he sees it, tellings are more connected to stating information and facts and as such are meant to be informative. Sayings concern matters of opinion and personal conviction. Millar claims that we, as participants of the practice of testifying, are able simply to see whether our informant is purporting to inform us or is just saying things.<sup>4</sup> Contrary to Millar, and probably many other epistemologists, we believe that important epistemic benefits are served by both; tellings and sayings alike can have significant impact on us. Apart from that, tellings, in regard to narrative arts, can have a double aspect, as we have already indicated when we distinguished two ways of facts stating. We will tackle this in more details later on, but for the moment we will just give the general outline. We distinguish between tellings as mere providing of facts, and tellings as specifically involving and remarking way of providing them. In this second case, tellings do not consist only in mere providing of facts, but in doing so in

a way which is particularly moving and enlightening. In regard to our claim that narrative arts can be seen as a kind of testimony, we will try to show that it in fact can be taken in both senses and that there are different epistemological benefits that can be extracted from these two aspects of testimony. However, in order to do that, we, the listeners, have to do “our share of epistemic work”, which means that we are not allowed to accept the given statement without some kind of evidence that supports that claim.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, specifying what this actually includes is beyond the scope of this paper, but the general idea is that a listener should somehow back up either the statement or the testifier’s competence in order to accept the testimony. We will spend a few words only on the particularly acute problem of what could count as ‘evidence’ in the case of the endorsement of sayings. In this case, we can hardly appeal to mere factual evidence. The explanation is analogous to that developed by Elvio Baccarini in the discussion of change of moral seeing. He discusses a thought experiment of Christopher Cowley,<sup>6</sup> who presents a case of degenerative change of moral seeing (the case of a doctor with initial humanitarian motivation, who became a racist after his experience with ethnic minorities). As Baccarini shows, while developing and commenting Cowley’s discussion, the doctor can resist the endorsement of the new outlook by appealing to different moral and epistemic resources, for example, by a reflection that

“... may include, among others (a) an appeal to factual beliefs on the subject matter (facts about the ethnic communities, among else facts about natural characteristics of the members of ethnic minorities, as well as about the social origin of the underdevelopment of these communities; comparative facts about these communities and the community to which the doctor belongs – e.g. real statistics about behavioral phenomena in all these communities, or a comparison between these communities and the community to which the doctor belongs in its recent history), (b) a reflection on the coherence of his beliefs (about whether endorsing racism would fit in his best coherent system of beliefs), and (c) a reflection on himself and on the origin of the situation that created his view (whether his reaction was created by morally distortive influences, for example by a bad influence of personal pride related to the fact that he did not receive the gratitude of the members of the ethnic community in the way that he expected), etc. These reflections can lead the doctor not to endorse the racist view.”<sup>7</sup>

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B. Nanay, “Narrative Pictures”, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 67 (1), 2009, 119–129.

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As Lamarque sees it, “The terms ‘fiction’ and ‘literature’ have different extensions and different meanings. Not all fictions are ‘literary’ – most genre fiction, whodunit, spy, horror, romance, sci fi, is not deemed to be literature – nor are all literary works fictional, e.g. belles lettres writing of biography or history; also, arguably, some poetry. The meanings of the terms differ not least because ‘literature’ has an evaluative element lacking in ‘fiction’”. (P. Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2009, 175) The issue is however far from settled, in that it is hard to pinpoint the exact features of writing which would turn it into a literature or into a fiction. For a more detailed account of it, see P. Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature*, chs. 2 and 5, and P. Lamarque and S. Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction and Literature*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1994, 268–289.

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A. Millar, “Knowledge from Being Told”, in A. Haddock, A. Millar and D. Pritchard (eds.), *Social Epistemology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010, 175–193.

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This is the idea developed by Lackey, but is by no means unique to her. Many epistemologists, particularly those who embrace some kind of evidentialist position, claim that we need to have some additional back up for the claim we are told in order to accept it as true. (See J. Lackey, *Learning From Words*).

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C. Cowley, *Medical Ethics, Ordinary Concepts and Ordinary Lives*, Basingstoke, Houndmills and Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2008.

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E. Baccarini, “On Cowley’s Medical Ethics”, *Ethics & Politics*, 9 (2), 2009, 205–206.

In our opinion, these are examples of epistemological resources analogous to those on which we may rely when we reflect about endorsing a saying, and that satisfy, in the case of sayings, the epistemological ideal of evidentialism.

In any case, we accept the idea that we should not trust testimonies blindly.<sup>8</sup> This is important, because, as we will show, it has a direct connection to the way we can accept contents of an artwork as a reliable testimony about something.

Before going on, let us just summarize the claims made so far:

1. We propose to treat at least some artworks (namely narrative, and mainly literature) as testimony which we will call fictional testimony in order to make it distinct from real life (hence non fictional) testimony.
2. Testimony, peeled to its bare essentials, includes people telling us all sorts of things.
3. Those things that we are told can roughly be divided into tellings and sayings.
4. Tellings in artworks can further be divided into mere stating of facts and especially involving and enlightening stating.
5. We must not blindly accept what other people tell us.

There are of course many people who claim that art (and, most frequently, literature) has some kind of a cognitive value; in fact, some of them claim that it is what makes literature artistically valuable.<sup>9</sup> However, we do not want to claim that. The question of whether cognitive value advances, reduces or is neutral toward artistic value is not of our concern here, and we do not want to take stand on the issue. Our perspective is strictly epistemological. As we have already said, it is our claim that at least some artworks can actually be regarded as some kind of a testimony of the author. Given what we have said about testimony and its two aspects, we now have to show that at least some artworks can actually be seen as a testimony. In the remaining part of the paper, most of the time we will speak directly of literature, as the paradigmatic example of the kind of art that most clearly and frequently offers examples that fit well with our epistemological position. We will also rely on some examples from film, and from narrative visual arts.

### 3.

One obvious problem is probably evident at this point. Literary works (but we can say the same about other narrative artworks relevant for our thesis) are for the most part imagined, invented or made up and these are the reasons why they could even be labeled untrue. Fictional characters are usually non-existent, and even when they are taken from reality, like Napoleon in *War and Peace*, or Caesar in Shakespeare's tragedy, it is dubious how "real" they remain in the world of the novel.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, can what Tolstoy and Shakespeare tell us be a source of knowledge for us?

The problem we have now identified is this: if a work of fiction is a set of sentences among which are at least some that are not true in the ordinary sense of the word, or which do not refer to anything in the real world, does it mean that we have to give up the idea that a work of fiction is a testimony that can have a very important cognitive role for the readers? Does it mean that there is nothing cognitively valuable in descriptions of France which we read in Flaubert or of Venice we find in Canaletto's pictures, or that higher class

life style found in Edith Wharton's novels are all false, or that we do not learn anything about the real conditions of real workers from Honoré Daumier's picture *The Third-Class Carriage*? We will try to show that not. By analyzing more thoroughly some artworks, we will try to show that the problem of non-referentiality can be avoided, or at least neutralized. But first of all, we will try to see why the claim that fictional and non fictional testimonies are similar is plausible.

At the most general level, we can regard some artworks as testimony because they include one person, namely the author, telling things to the other, his audience. In that sense, the most general account of testimony is satisfied. In Dreiser's *American Tragedy* we can find very precise descriptions of American working class and the hard conditions they lived in. In an excellent psychological portrayal of people who survived the Second World War, authors like Hemingway and Remarque bring to light the terrifying consequences that war can have on people. In the same way, in writing *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy is not just portraying "an unhappy family", through his characters he is talking about social circumstances in Russia in those days. So obviously, in all of these examples, two key features of testimony are operating: a narrator is telling his audience something, transmitting them thus some kind of a message, information or novelty, which is captured by Millar's notion of tellings. On the other hand, he is also giving his opinion about something. In that sense, the testimony is a mixture of tellings and sayings as explained above, and we will now try to see which part of a literary text can perform the role of tellings, and which of the sayings, and we will try to assign them the accessory epistemological benefits. We will focus on two kinds of epistemological benefits: the acquisition of new facts, and better understanding.

So, what are then the epistemological benefits of the 'tellings part' and which exactly are those? Philosophers usually refer to some parts of the novel as factual descriptions;<sup>11</sup> the idea is that a great amount of fiction actually has a reference to something in the real life and therefore is not really fictional. Whether it is some real place, historical event, a building or whatever, it is something that we can actually see in the real world. Certainly we can go to Spain and see the places Hemingway describes in his novels. Apart from

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This idea is nicely developed by Snježana Prijić-Samaržija (S. Prijić-Samaržija, "Blind Trust", *Synthesis Philosophica*, 15 (1–2), 2000, 97–106; S. Prijić-Samaržija, "Evidencijalizam i povjerenje", *Filozofska istraživanja*, 27 (3), 2007, 671–683).

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For different accounts of this, see, for example: G. Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts*, Routledge, London, 1997; B. Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007; J.O. Young, *Art and Knowledge*, Routledge, London, 2001.

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This is an instance of a more general problem regarding the truth in literature/fiction. Many philosophers have tried to show that truth can be accommodated within the novels, although sometimes it is hard to pinpoint where truth ends and imagination begins. Sometimes a distinction is made between real world and

a world of the novel, and the idea is that we can only speak about what is true in the world of the novel, without inferring from it what is true in the real world. However, there are also those who claim that novels "work" with real world facts (a famous phrase by David Lodge states that "novels burn facts like engine burn fuel", quoted in P. Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature*, 227). We believe that for our paper we do not have to deal with this question, given that the narrative arts we are interested in have enough connections with the real world to accommodate truth (as our examples will show). However, for a more detailed account of this problem, see P. Lamarque and S. Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction and Literature* (parts 1 and 3), P. Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature* (chs. 5 and 6).

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See for example P. Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature*, 227.



factual descriptions, there are depictions and descriptions of real life events, customs, rules, procedures; like a description of miners' community life style in *Sons and Lovers*, or bullfight in Hemingway. In both of these, a writer is still dealing with things that can be geographically, historically, sociologically, politically (and probably in some other ways) verified. The idea behind this is that, although this particular miner, Walter Morel that D. H. Lawrence describes is in all likelihood imagined,<sup>12</sup> miners of *that kind* did exist and they did what Walter Morel does in the novel. This is captured by Gibson's claim that fictional characters follow real life activities,<sup>13</sup> and at the more general level, by the claim that fictional characters actually represent "person-kinds" borrowed from the real world.<sup>14</sup>

So, we can have two kinds of fact-descriptions in artworks: a direct description of (real world) facts – like the description of the social circumstances of a town or of a state in a particular historical moment that we find in a novel. In this case the author describes directly, for example, Chicago at a particular historical moment. Here is Dreiser writing about Chicago in *Sister Carrie*:

"In 1889 Chicago had the peculiar qualifications of growth which made such adventuresome pilgrimages even on the part of young girls plausible. Its many and growing commercial opportunities gave it widespread fame, which made of it a giant magnet, drawing to itself, from all quarters, the hopeful and the hopeless--those who had their fortune yet to make and those whose fortunes and affairs had reached a disastrous climax elsewhere. It was a city of over 500,000, with the ambition, the daring, the activity of a metropolis of a million. Its streets and houses were already scattered over an area of seventy-five square miles. Its population was not so much thriving upon established commerce as upon the industries which prepared for the arrival of others. The sound of the hammer engaged upon the erection of new structures was everywhere heard. Great industries were moving in. The huge railroad corporations which had long before recognised the prospects of the place had seized upon vast tracts of land for transfer and shipping purposes. Street-car lines had been extended far out into the open country in anticipation of rapid growth. The city had laid miles and miles of streets and sewers through regions where, perhaps, one solitary house stood out alone--a pioneer of the populous ways to be. There were regions open to the sweeping winds and rain, which were yet lighted throughout the night with long, blinking lines of gas-lamps, fluttering in the wind. Narrow board walks extended out, passing here a house, and there a store, at far intervals, eventually ending on the open prairie.

In the central portion was the vast wholesale and shopping district, to which the uninformed seeker for work usually drifted. It was a characteristic of Chicago then, and one not generally shared by other cities, that individual firms of any pretension occupied individual buildings. The presence of ample ground made this possible. It gave an imposing appearance to most of the wholesale houses, whose offices were upon the ground floor and in plain view of the street. The large plates of window glass, now so common, were then rapidly coming into use, and gave to the ground floor offices a distinguished and prosperous look. The casual wanderer could see as he passed a polished array of office fixtures, much frosted glass, clerks hard at work, and genteel businessmen in 'nobby' suits and clean linen lounging about or sitting in groups. Polished brass or nickel signs at the square stone entrances announced the firm and the nature of the business in rather neat and reserved terms. The entire metropolitan centre possessed a high and mighty air calculated to overawe and abash the common applicant, and to make the gulf between poverty and success seem both wide and deep."<sup>15</sup>

The other kind of descriptions we mentioned is indirect description, when the author describes, for example, a certain kind of character, through an imaginary figure (Ana Karenina representing unhappily married woman who succumbs to the temptation of adultery) or a certain kind of society through a description of an imagined state (like Orwell does in *1984*).

The case is rather clear with the first kind: when the author describes real world facts, his description can offer us new information about the phenomena, something which we did not know before. Flaubert's description of provincial France or the above quote from *Sister Carrie* is a nice example of this.

But things are not so simple with indirect descriptions. Two problems appear here. The first is that, although the author describes real facts, he or she frequently deviates from reality. Second, this deviation in many cases is evidently not a fault of the artwork. Let us think about two examples. The first one is represented by *Julius Caesar* by William Shakespeare, the other *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco. In the first case we have the wrong indication of the date of Caesar's murder. In the second case, among other anachronisms, we have the description of one character playing a violin, which cannot be correct, since violin was invented after medieval age. It would be unusual to indicate the two descriptions as faults of the two works. This, however, speaks in favor of the thesis that we cannot advance knowledge of facts through literary works. From these two examples it appears that Shakespeare and Eco were under no constraints to describe real facts. But if there are no such constraints, how can we distinguish between the cases when descriptions stand for real facts, and cases when they do not do this? If we cannot make this distinction, what epistemological benefits can we get from anything they tell us? If we generalize from these two examples, it would appear that neither it is a constraint for literature (and in general, narrative arts) to tell the truth, nor that we can have epistemological benefits from it, at least as far as acquisition of new facts is concerned.

However, we do not think that such a generalization is justified. There are artworks constrained by the concern for truth, and departing from truth would be a major failure for them.<sup>16</sup> As a universally known example, we mention Orwell's *1984*. The novel has an obvious intention to speak about a real phenomenon: the totalitarian regime. From the standpoint of the audience, this artwork would lose a great part of its appeal if it were shown that it depicts reality in a wrong way, if, e.g., *1984* were only a work of antisocialist propaganda wrongly showing a benign society characterized by the sense of community and solidarity, as values appreciated more strongly than the individu-

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Notice that the fact that this miner is imagined does not mean that Lawrence did not use a real life person to shape him accordingly. The character of Gertrude Morel is based on his own mother and many say that Paul Morel's problem with romantic relationships and women are in fact very similar to Lawrence's own experience and connection to his mother: "Sons and Lovers is largely autobiographical, and chronicles the domestic conflicts in his own home between a hoarse, inarticulate father and a self-consciously genteel mother" (R. Carter and J. McRae (eds.) *The Routledge History of Literature in English*, Routledge, London, 1997). Many other writers use real life people or situation as inspiration, this goes for characters found in Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Tolstoy, and many others. Flaubert himself claimed that there is one Emma crying in every village of France.

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J. Gibson, "Between Truth and Triviality", *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 43 (3), 2003, 224–237.

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Lamarque attributes this idea to Nicholas Wolterstorff. See P. Lamarque, *The Philoso-*

*phy of Literature*, 192. However, the whole problem of "what/who are fictional characters" should not be an obstacle for our claim that we can learn something about what it is like to be in an unhappy marriage by reading *Madame Bovary*.

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T. Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, <http://www.faculty.fairfield.edu/faculty/hodgson/Courses/City/Dreiser/ch02.html>, accessed on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010.

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By this we do not want to avoid neutrality in relation to the question about whether contribution to advancement of knowledge, or other cognitive benefits, are an aspect of the artistic value of artworks. It may be that advancement of knowledge, or other cognitive benefits, are a contingent benefit from art, and that the constraints depend only on genre conventions. An example of how the two are combined is provided by Lamarque (although he does not believe that cognitive value advances artistic value), in his discussion on "accuracy and genre conventions" (P. Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature*, 230).

alistic values of the liberal societies. This constraint, to speak the truth, or to depict reality as it is, is not just something accidental to the works themselves, in some cases it is the motivating factor behind them. Let us take an example from the film this time: *American History X* portrays the lives of people sucked into the horror of racism and neo-Nazism. If it turned out that in the real world neo-Nazis do not behave like in this film, this film would most certainly lose its appeal.

In virtue of these constraints, we can say that we may take some artworks to be reliable source of information. The problem is that we must recognize which artworks operate under these constraints – namely, the constraints to tell the truth – and which do not. We can do this by various interpretative means, and frequently we are helped by genre conventions: we know the truth-constrained peculiarities of historical novels, socially and politically engaged art, etc. Although there are differences in the way we verify whether we may gain epistemological benefits in what an ordinary informer tells us, and in an artwork, here we have a parallel issue to that in the case of any kind of testimony. As we have shown earlier while speaking about non-fictional testimony, we cannot blindly trust, but we have to verify the competence and the intentions of the informer. In the same manner, we do not want to claim that we can immediately accept as true things we read in the novel or see in a film, or their perspective as appropriate: some kind of a background check is necessary before accepting as true or appropriate what the novel tells us. Without any such confirmation, we believe, one should sustain from accepting the statements.

Three remaining challenges appear here. The first is: even if Orwell is constrained to tell the truth about facts in a totalitarian regime and he has that intention, and tries to do this, what guarantees do we have that he is doing this? The second is: *1984* does not describe any real case of totalitarian regime. If it is Orwell's intention to describe a *real* social phenomenon, it may appear that he fails. The third is: the knowledge of facts that we receive from artworks is banal and irrelevant. We can receive all these information by making use of other resources, like journalists' reports, historical essays, works in sociology of politics, etc.

Regarding the first issue, we agree with the thesis that there are no guarantees in an artwork regarding its telling the truth. After all, there were people with very different opinions about, for example, Stalin's regime. There are, unfortunately even today, attempts to make a historical rehabilitation of the Nazi regime, and even reputable historians are engaged in attempts of historical revisionism. We might say that it would not be the best way to change the mind of these people by showing them a novel. The reason is that it cannot provide arguments. We think that this is partially true. Literary works do not provide arguments and, therefore, cannot stay alone in advancing knowledge.<sup>17</sup> However, we do not think that we can advance knowledge on any complicated issue by relying on isolated sources of truth and insights. This is the reason why we think that literary works can contribute to advancement of knowledge, but only in cooperation with other sources of information and insights. The requirement on artworks to provide guarantees of their truthfulness on their own is too strong, but it is not a problem only for art. Most of our knowledge about interesting or complicated issues asks for confirmation from different sources.

Regarding the second issue, we agree that there was not any such regime with precisely the features described by Orwell. But the departures do not repre-



sent deviations from truth-conduciveness, but, on the contrary, devices that help us to apprehend reality in the proper way, represented by the resources of literature. As two examples, we mention amplification (in Orwell's case, the features of the social system are amplified, there were no totalitarian regimes as totalitarian, as that described in *1984*) and simplification (some complexities of the real life social system are avoided, in order to render more clear the essential features of the regime).<sup>18</sup> By these means the work does not show precise facts about particular regimes, like an essay in political sociology does, but it is efficacious in offering valid insights about the salient features of a totalitarian regime. We think that the main virtue of the novel is in this result. By this we arrive to the third issue.

Among the possible (epistemological) contributions of artworks there are, for example, their ability to focus our attention on relevant details that are not the proper subject matter of other possible sources of knowledge, or that cannot be brought to attention so powerfully by these other sources of knowledge – like historical, political or sociological essays – or in the course of real life. *1984* very successfully focuses the attention on the frustration and humiliation of intimate human emotions in a totalitarian regime, and this is something that can be missed out in front of a cold, and usually more generalized, sociological or historical description of totalitarianism. In the same vein, Honoré Daumier does the same in relation to the condition of workers and their families in *The Third-Class Carriage*. We can say that what art can do for us is not only provide us with facts, it can make us more aware of them, or of their relevance. Instead of giving us knowledge, or knowledge building propositions, it can make us become more sensitive towards something, it can raise our awareness about something, it can make us appreciate it better. Consider a world famous film, *Boys Don't Cry*. It depicts a real life phenomenon, a transgender person who is born with physical manifestations of a woman but feels like a man. One can of course go to medical, psychological and sociological literature in order to find information about this, but chances are, none of the available literature will be able to give the kind of insight into the terrible torments of what these people go through in their search for love, friendship and acceptance. The film is excellent example of how an artwork can give us vivid and active knowledge, instead of mere coming in contact with facts by which we form beliefs that remain passive, or that do not play the appropriate epistemological work, as when, for example, we do not extrapolate the appropriate conclusions from the knowledge we receive from, for example, TV news about the discrimination of the sexual minorities.

As another example of this, we will show how Carroll indicates the way novels can help us understand better the proper attribution of virtues. He speaks about a process of conceptual deepening he calls virtue wheel.<sup>19</sup> The process consists in comparing and contrasting different characters that in different

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This idea is nicely captured by Lamarque in his discussion on truth in fiction. He claims: "A further worry about the emphasis on truth, aside from concerns about verifiability, is that these very general propositions are seldom defended or argued for in works of literature. This makes the literary context seem very different from the philosophic or scientific one, where reasoning and evidence are paramount." (P. Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature*, 235)

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For these kinds of devices of literature, see: J. O. Young, *Art and Knowledge*, Routledge, London, 2001, 80–88.

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N. Carroll, "The Wheel of Virtue. Art, Literature, and Moral Knowledge", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 60 (1), 2002, 3–26.

ways and to different degrees instantiate the virtues of, for example, practicality and imagination. The example on which Carroll relies is *Howards End* by E. M. Forster. Here we have two families, the Schlegals, who in different ways and nuances instantiate the virtue of imagination, and the Wilcoxes, who in different ways and nuances instantiate the virtue of practicality. Some of the characters instantiate imagination in such a way as being insufficiently insensitive to issues of immediate concern, while some characters instantiate practicality in such a way as losing the proper capacity of imagination. By all these comparisons of characters, we identify the *aurea mediocritas* where the virtues are properly instantiated.

In this case, remarked by Carroll, although the artist describes facts, the proper epistemological virtue of the artwork does not consist in our acquisition of these facts. It may be that we already knew at least some people similar to at least some of the characters depicted in *Howards End*, or that we acquire such knowledge by other means. What we really gain from this novel is a new possibility to estimate, or understand, some facts, that is, character traits of some people. This enables us to understand better the most peculiar and distinctive role of artworks as tellings. It is not only relevant that artworks inform us about some facts (the mere knowledge they offer can be banal). What is really important is the instructive and powerful way in which artworks present these facts to us and the cognitive impact they have.

The virtues of artworks intended as tellings that we have remarked in the last part of the section go above the mere acquisition of facts. They help us see things in a new way, or to make new inferences from the things we already know. As we saw, tellings in artworks are specific. Although they imply description of facts, as it is usual for tellings, the most interesting manifestations of artworks as tellings is represented not only by the telling of facts, but by the *particularly strong and involving* description of facts: such a description that makes the acquisition of a fact truly active in our cognitive system and makes us truly aware of the relevance of the fact. Think again of the case of Daumier's picture, where he powerfully describes workers and their families, making us thus more aware of their conditions of depravation, as well as of how outrageous these conditions are from the standpoint of justice and the dignity of humanity. Similar point is developed even further by Barys Gaut. He claims that some artworks are particularly valuable in that they can teach us something, and one of the ways they do that is through employing "artistic techniques such as the use of imagery and the nuanced presentation of characters and situations (...)." <sup>20</sup> In discussing a passage from, Ruth Rendell's *Kissing the Gunner's Daughter*, in which a murder is described, he tries to show that

"(t)his passage deploys some powerful imagery to bring home the horror of the murder it describes. The stark color contrasts between the red of the blood, and the gold and green of the décor; the mixing of types of fluid – blood, oil, paint, sauce; the violation of the normal boundaries between ourselves and what we eat; the insistent repetition of the word 'blood' throughout, and the repetition of the image of blood as sauce at the end, all contribute to the powerful image of carnage, an evocation of disgust that is both visceral and moral. This is an image of murder that gives full weight to the moral horror that it describes. It shows how, by developing artistic devices, one can forcefully bring home a moral point of view." <sup>21</sup>

Through this we arrive to what is the characteristic contribution of artworks intended as sayings. Here, obviously, there is a total absence of contribution by providing new facts – this is not in the nature of sayings. However, the relevant epistemological contribution is equivalent to what we have indicated

as the most powerful contribution of artworks as tellings: a better understanding and awareness, as well as enlightening of facts depicted. In the next part of the paper we indicate some cases of artworks as sayings, although the demarcation of artworks as tellings and artworks as sayings is not always clear, and not always rigid (which we can say similarly in relation to our previous examples of artworks as tellings).

#### 4.

Remember that sayings have to do with delivering matters of personal opinion, attitudes, likes and dislikes, which cannot be verified in the way that factual statements can, but which very often serve to trigger our thoughts about something, or they make us see things in a new light or from a different angle. Here we must remark the difference between sayings and the second aspect of tellings. In this aspect, tellings do not neutrally provide facts, but they do this in such a way that the description of the facts is particularly moving. For example, Orwell does this in the way he describes the salient features of a totalitarian regime. However, tellings are strictly related to facts. On the other hand, the essential aspect of sayings is not to refer to facts, but to express the attitude, the vision, the taste and similar subjective stances of the author.

Although, when we approach artworks as sayings we cannot satisfy the aim of reaching direct knowledge, or justified true belief/ves about facts, we gain other cognitive values, such as formative experience, higher awareness, acknowledgment about things, challenges to rethinking, reconsidering, reevaluating etc. Although these goals might also be served by factual parts of the artworks (like we have shown earlier on the example of Honoré Daumier's picture, or *Howards End*), they are supported as well, or, sometimes, even more powerfully, by non-fact stating aspects of artworks, like implied truths, usually thought of as "the moral of the story", generalizations about the world and people's nature, author's own beliefs about things, his comments, rhetorical questions and similar. Very often authors are prone to "speak their own mind" in the artwork, making us thus question our own view or challenging us to accept some new perspective. As two examples we use Oedipus' story and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In *Oedipus Rex* Sophocles does not describe any real world fact, but expresses a moral vision that concerns the relation between virtue and fate. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* again the author does not rely on real world facts but through an imaginary artwork offers the aestheticist's worldview. Since there is nothing substantially factual in these, it is reasonable to ask whether any epistemological purpose is therefore served. So we have to ask: what are the epistemological gains we derive from these kinds of artworks?

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B. Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, 188.

21

B. Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, 188–189. Description of the scene of the murder to which he refers is the following: "Blood has splashed the dark-green papered walls, the green and gold lampshades in which the bulbs remained alight, had stained the dark-green carpet in black blotches. A drop of blood had struck a picture on the wall, trickled down the pale thick oil paint and dried there. On the ta-

ble were three plates with food on them. On two of them the food remained there, cold and congealing, but recognizably food. The third was drenched with blood, as if a sauce had been poured liberally over it, as if a bottle of sauce had been emptied on to it for some horror meal" (quoted from B. Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, 188).

Well, to begin with, none that are as direct as in the case of Daumier's picture, or *1984*. In fact, as Lamarque says in commenting *Hecuba* (in which, according to Martha Nussbaum, Euripides leads us to the vision that "nothing human is ever worthy of trust: there are no guarantees at all, short of revenge or death"),<sup>22</sup> her story certainly does not indicate a truth about human condition, because it represents too pessimistic a view.<sup>23</sup> But that does not mean that there is no epistemological value that can be drawn from the tragedy. As we said before, we should not confine ourselves only to the pursuit of propositional knowledge of facts. There are other cognitive values we should strive towards, and artworks can be seen as a splendid vehicle for helping us reach them. There is always something new that we can built into our "picture of the world", there are always some new things we have not thought about yet and artworks can have a great role in highlighting these new "hypotheses", in giving different perspective on something. We could have very firm opinions on love and sexuality, but Shakespeare's analysis of the relation between the two – as, for example, in *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* – is bound to shake our world. The main epistemological achievement in these cases is formative experience, the capacity we develop for forming our judgments by examining unexpected situations and challenging visions. Even if the story of Antony and Cleopatra is not representative of mature love (contrary to what Tzachi Zamir says),<sup>24</sup> we can add to our thinking also the vision offered by Shakespeare in the case of the two characters. The same is true in relation to the teaching Euripides offers us from *Hecuba*'s story. The purpose of these artworks is to make us think about these topics from a perspective earlier not present to us, to make us see "the other angle", to show us what kinds of experience are out there, to let us in the world of people who go through these experiences. Therefore, even if they are not directly giving us any factual message, they improve our sensible approach. We do have to try to think about their theme, we do have to try to verify our perception of the world, and that is something that art can help us with. In a sense, an artwork can show us different experiences, different life stories, some of which can be rather similar to ours and some of which very distant. Very importantly, an artwork can give us a sense of what is like, or what would be like, to be a kind of a person, to live in a kind of situation, or in a kind of society (transgender person living among people not sensitive toward individuals who are different; romantic person in love with a girl in a society that does not allow personal relations based on love and mutual affection).<sup>25</sup>

We face now an obvious objection that can be directed to the cases of tellings and maybe even more to the cases of sayings. The objection states that there is too much distance between, let us say, the stories of Antony and Cleopatra, Lear, Hamlet, or *Hecuba* with the situations with which we are really engaged. As a consequence, we do not receive any relevant cognitive contribution from their stories.<sup>26</sup> There are two possible replies here. The first is that although there are strong dissimilarities, there are salient similarities as well. Although Lamarque firmly denies this, we believe that he is wrong in claiming that the situations described in the fiction are too distant from us to have any real impact on us. For one thing, as he (together with Olsen) acknowledges, literature matters for us because it deals with issues of permanent and universal importance for us, human beings ("questions of deep human interest").<sup>27</sup> We offer three possible interpretations of what Lamarque and Olsen might think by that. First, the specific love of Antony and Cleopatra is a matter of general interest for human beings in the sense that it is something for what every human being has a natural curiosity. This, which appears to be a "gossip hypoth-

esis”, does not seem to us as a relevant proposal. Second, which we find to be the most plausible interpretation of what they might mean: love is an issue of universal human value, and the story of Antony and Cleopatra, as constructed by Shakespeare, is relevant as a powerful and involving description of a specific manifestation of love. We opt for the third candidate: the story of Antony and Cleopatra, as constructed by Shakespeare, has salient features in common, and permits us to understand better, other manifestations of love (or, more precisely, of mature love, as remarked by Zamir), although those others happen in less dramatic circumstances. Obviously, the development of this hypothesis requires carefulness in the application to specific instances in order to avoid deriving implausible connections between, for example, Hamlet’s familial tragedy and common family quarrels. However, the hypothesis seems promising if we relate it, for example, to the aforementioned Zamir’s book, where the author tries to extrapolate teachings of universal human interest from various Shakespeare’s tragedies.

As one additional comment we would add that, perhaps, some cases of departures, in artworks, from features of common or real life persons or events may be cases of rhetorical devices, i.e. of departures from reality intended by the author in order to remark more clearly salient features of real life persons, similar to the two cases of devices we have shown as used by Orwell in order to remark salient features of a totalitarian regime.

The second reply is this: we can agree with Lamarque and Olsen in their claim that Hamlet is too complicated a character to have any real connections to our everyday life, but that does not mean that all artworks are like that. Think about the case of David Lurie in Coetzee’s *Disgrace*. It appears difficult for us not to think that his story is instructive for possible situations that we may face in real life situations, and that it helps us face these situations with a more nuanced and nurtured moral sensibility. Or, think again of *Howards End*, taken by Carroll as a paradigmatic example for the understanding of virtues. Again, we have characters sufficiently close to real life persons, so that we can extrapolate from the novel teachings suitable for real life.

22

M. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness. Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986, 419.

23

P. Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature*, 237.

24

T. Zamir, *Double Vision. Moral Philosophy and Shakespearean Drama*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2006, 129–150.

25

This line of thought is advocated for by B. Gaut, who claims that it is one of the values of art the fact that it can show us experiences we did not go through ourselves. Art employs imagination which then helps us see what would be like for us to undergo some experience. In that sense, Gaut claims, art can teach us new things. See B. Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, ch. 7.

26

Lamarque and Olsen develop this point. They claim: “Although individual aspects, characters, or incidents abstracted from a work might yield an empathetic response in a reader it is most unlikely that literary works taken as a whole – as works – will present situations that could provide a coherent and unified experience describable as “knowing what it is like”. A Hamlet – situation for example is far too complex and specific to give rise to any single and sustained experience, certainly not one that will be relevant to a reader’s daily life” (P. Lamarque and S. Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction and Literature*, 378. Lamarque again emphasizes the same point in his *The Philosophy of Literature*, 248).

27

This is captured by the so-called “mimetic aspect” of literature. See P. Lamarque and S. Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction and Literature*, chs. 10 and 16.



## 5.

In this paper, we have tried to show different epistemic benefits we gain from dealing with narrative art. We did not want to claim that all narrative art has these benefits, or that we can blindly accept everything these artworks present us; we wanted to show that at least some narrative arts are rather similar in structure to testimony, which is epistemologically recognized source of knowledge. However, contrary to usual testimony, the most peculiar and distinctive contribution of artwork is not represented by mere providing of facts, but by the deepening of our understanding of the world, or by raising our awareness about something. This can be obtained either by artworks as tellings, i.e. by the specifically enlightening or involving way in which arts provide us the facts, or by artworks as sayings, i.e. by showing the opinion, way of seeing, way of judging, or other attitudinal expression of the artist which can trigger our thinking about the world in new ways, or make us more aware or more sensitive towards things, or challenge our established outlook.

Obviously, in fictional, as well as in nonfictional testimony, people can deliver false statements (intentionally or unintentionally), and therefore, in fictional and nonfictional testimony alike, deliverances of the testifier are not to be accepted without some other evidence that point either to the sincerity and reliability of the testifier or to the truthfulness (appropriateness, validity, etc) of his claim. The important fact is that this is not a problem specific for the artistic epistemological contribution.

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### **Umjetnost, znanje, svjedočanstvo**

#### **Sažetak**

U ovom radu želimo istražiti različite epistemološke koristi koje dobivamo putem nekih umjetničkih djela, pri čemu smo primarno usredotočeni na narativne umjetnosti. Tvrdimo da u određenom smislu, narativne umjetnosti (primjerice književnost, film a i neka djela vizualne umjetnosti) mogu biti slične svjedočanstvu, utoliko što pružaju informacije koje mogu biti epistemološki vrijedne za kognitivne djelatnike kakvi smo mi. Razlikujemo barem dvije šire kategorije tih epistemoloških vrijednosti, od kojih prva uključuje 'navođenje činjenica' i u tom je smislu pandan paradigmatskom slučaju svjedočanstva u kojem ono što informator govori može biti izvor znanja za publiku koja time naprosto dobiva činjenice (ovo je prvi slučaj, kada govorimo o umjetničkim djelima kao o 'tellings'). Međutim, to nije najsvojstvenija i najznačajnija vrsta epistemoloških vrijednosti koje dobijemo iz umjetnosti. Druga kategorija tiče se povećavanja svijesti ili produbljivanja razumijevanja o nekom fenomenu, koji se može odvijati na dva načina: ili pružanjem činjenica na specifično snažan i prožimalački način (ovo je drugi smisao u kojem o umjetničkom djelu možemo govoriti kao o 'tellings'), ili prezentiranjem stajališta, stava ili mišljenja umjetnika koji nam može biti prosvjetljujući ili pak predstavljati izazov našem stajalištu.

#### **Ključne riječi**

narativne umjetnosti, svjedočanstvo, znanje, epistemološke koristi

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### **Kunst, Wissen und Zeugnis**

#### **Zusammenfassung**

In diesem Paper möchten wir den unterschiedlichen epistemologischen Vorzügen auf den Grund gehen, die wir in der Arbeit mit einigen Kunstwerken erlangen, wobei unser Schwerpunkt in der narrativen Kunst liegt. Wir behaupten, die narrativen Künste (z. B. Literatur, Film und möglicherweise überdies einzelne Ausdrücke der visuellen Kunst) könnten in gewissem Sinne dem Zeugnis ähneln, insofern sie Informationen besorgen, die epistemologisch wertvoll für kognitive Agenten wie uns seien. Wir identifizieren zumindest zwei breite Kategorien dieser epistemologischen Vorzüge, die Erste schließt „Tatsachenangaben“ ein und ist in diesem Sinne vergleichbar mit dem paradigmatischen Fall des Zeugnisses, wo die Aussagen des Zeugen als Wissensquelle, als bloße Faktenaneignung für sein Publikum zu dienen vermögen (dies repräsentiert den ersten Fall, welcher von den Kunstwerken als den „Tellings“ handelt). Dies dagegen ist nicht die eigenartigste und distinktivste Art der epistemologischen Werte, die uns die Kunst verschafft. Die andere hat es mit der Bewusstseinssteigerung sowie Verständnisvertiefung bezüglich gewisser Fragestellungen zu tun, entweder durch spezifische, kraftvolle und involvierende Art der Tatsachenvermittlung (dies repräsentiert den zweiten Fall, wo die Rede von den Kunstwerken als den „Tellings“ ist), oder eben durch die Präsentierung der Haltung, Einstellung oder Ansicht des Künstlers, welche sich für uns als erhellend oder herausfordernd herauschälen könnten (diesfalls reden wir von den „Sayings“).

#### **Schlüsselwörter**

narrative Künste, Literatur, Zeugnis, Wissen, epistemologische Vorzüge

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**Art, connaissance et témoignage**

**Résumé**

*Dans cet article, nous souhaitons étudier les différents avantages épistémologiques qu'on tire de certains ouvrages artistiques, en nous focalisant sur les arts narratifs. Nous affirmons que, dans un certain sens, les arts narratifs (ex. lettres, cinéma, mais aussi certaines formes d'expressions de l'art visuel) peuvent ressembler au témoignage, dans la mesure où ils fournissent des informations susceptibles d'être épistémologiquement précieuses aux acteurs cognitifs que nous sommes. Nous distinguons au moins deux catégories larges de ces avantages épistémologiques. La première comprend « l'énoncé des faits » et dans ce sens représente le pendant du cas paradigmatique de témoignage où, ce que le témoin dit, peut être source de connaissance pour le public qui de cette manière reçoit simplement les faits (il s'agit du premier cas, celui où nous parlons des ouvrages artistiques comme « tellings »). Cependant, cette sorte d'avantage épistémologique n'est pas la plus originale ou la plus pertinente qu'on puisse tirer de l'art. L'autre catégorie concerne l'accroissement de la conscience ou l'approfondissement de la compréhension de certains phénomènes, soit en rapportant les faits d'une façon spécifique, puissante et engageante (ceci est la deuxième façon dont nous considérons les ouvrages d'art comme « tellings »), soit en présentant la position, l'attitude ou l'opinion de l'artiste, qui puissent nous être révélateurs ou provocateurs.*

**Mots-clés**

Arts narratifs, lettres, témoignage, connaissance, avantages épistémologiques